

BIG HAT crash site, her training helps insulate her from what she sees. "When you look at a crash scientifically, you don't let yourself get caught up in questions like whether someone involved saw it coming. You focus on the technical stuff, switch gears."

MHP's force of about 230 troopers is responsible for enforcement on Montana's roadways, but troopers also back up the local police department, and police departments do the same for MHP.

Lofton worked as part of a team of forensic mapping specialists who assisted the Gallatin County Sheriff's Office with the Jason Wright homicide scene in Bozeman in June 2006, a task that took nine hours. Other than when she is tied to a desk writing incident reports, or in her car patrolling, she often works outside. An outdoor enthusiast, time outside is one of the perks of her job.

Lofton helped map the 2007 Mercy flight plane crash, a scene a mile long, with wreckage strewn across a rocky, tree-covered hillside in the Horse-shoe Hills, north of Belgrade. "It was dark by the time we were done. The batteries on our flashlights had all gone dead. They had to shoot off flares to

get us off the hillside," she said.

It was the first forensic mapping of a plane crash in Montana.

Lofton routinely interviews witnesses and victims of the crashes she investigates. If victims are taken to the hospital, once she's mapped a scene she will go there to talk with them. "The hardest part is dealing with families. They're upset. They want answers. You might be at the hospital and have a good idea of whether their loved one will make it or not. Sometimes you identify with them because you have similar interests or have met them in the past," she said.

With a traffic event, one resulting in fatalities, Lofton's investigative work includes piecing together the last 24 hours of victims' lives, requiring personal interviews with everyone the victim interacted with on the fatal day. It's an intimate and emotionally-challenging window into family dynamics and interpersonal relationships, one that can create unusual ties with survivors. She has had family members of victims call a year later, finally ready to hear the details of the crash that killed their loved one.

LIFE WITHOUT A BULLET-PROOF VEST

In March of 2008, Lofton helped provide security for the Democratic Governor's Conference, held in Big Sky. MHP provides protection for Montana's governor, and visiting dignitaries. A few troopers work this detail exclusively and are stationed in Helena, while local troopers work it more occasionally. At the conference, some of the governors brought their own security, but MHP still assigned a trooper to each governor. Lofton was the only woman chosen.

She has often worked executive duty for Governor Schweitzer, chauffeuring him from event to event while he's in Gallatin or Park County, the counties MHP's District 7 troopers work. "In academy, we learned specialized driving, turns and maneuvers to avoid things. A trained driver is more likely to be able to maneuver out of an attack situation," Lofton said. Dressed in her own clothes for this detail, people have assumed Lofton to be an aide to the governor, even his daughter.

Asked about executive duty, Lofton replied: "It's a nice change of pace."

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